

# Unit 1: Overview

## Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

## Be aware of the following

- Respect generated by learning Middle East customs and traditions
- Four major regions of Saudi Arabia
- Priority given to Fast of Ramadan and Hajj Pilgrimage in Saudi government and business
- Monarchical form of Saudi government

## Identify

- Culture
- Riyadh
- Bedouin
- Ramadan
- Hajj Pilgrimage

## Realize

- Fast pace of American culture vs. more leisurely Saudi ways
- Impact of Islam on Saudi Society
- Difficulty in obtaining accurate population figures in Gulf States
- Relatively high status enjoyed by Saudi's military

## Unit 1: Overview

**1. Introduction** It is important to keep in mind that many cultures are becoming exposed to American customs, from military and business dealings, travel, training, or study in the United States, television shows, or movies. Because of this experience, some Saudi associates will have adapted to American (or Western) ways of doing things, in many cases having accepted foreign values as their own.



Despite any apparent similarities, the newly deployed military member must see how he can be most effective and satisfied while he endeavors to learn and adapt to local customs and military traditions of the Middel East.

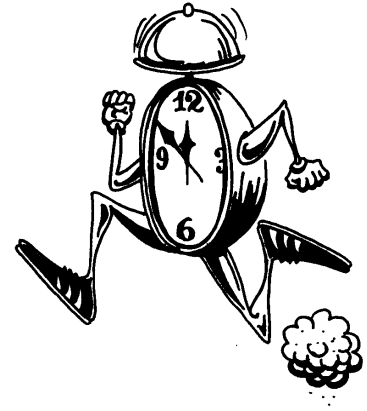
Even when some Saudis have adapted themselves to American ways, they and their more traditional compatriots will respect military personnel who demonstrate knowledge of and sensitivity to their customs and traditions.

### a. Culture and Lifestyle

Culture may be defined as the set of prescribed and complementary values, beliefs, and customs which enable people to survive in their native environment.

Because cultures developed in dissimilar environments and conditions, they usually differ in their "response" to the problems of life. Hence, U.S. military personnel must be prepared to confront patterns of thought and behavior which differ considerably from their own.

The lifestyle of most Saudi Arabians is quite different from that of Americans. In general, Americans live a type of life which is fast-moving, fast-changing, and closely tied to advanced technology, while the Saudi way of life flows along in a much more leisurely fashion, much as it has since ancient times.



This is not to say that the Saudis do not want progress for their country. They do indeed want progress, and fast change is taking place all over Saudi Arabia.

But the Saudis want mainly industrial and technological change, and do not welcome any social changes that would conflict with the orthodox beliefs of Islam. This is especially true where the traditional status of women is concerned.

## **b. Saudi Arabian Facts**

**(1) History** The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is named for the ruling family, came into existence in the period between the two World Wars. Prior to that time, the Saudi clan had been competing against various rivals for dominance in north-central and north-eastern Arabia. Its political fortunes fluctuated with the passage of time. In 1891, many families of the Saudi clan were evicted from their homes in Riyadh (re-YAHD), and so they lived as refugees for over a decade.

In 1902, Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, the founder of the present dynasty, captured Riyadh in a surprise attack and re-established Saudi authority there. He gradually took control of the surrounding areas and then seized al-Hasa Province from the Ottomans in 1913. Abdul Aziz had meanwhile been seeking a treaty with Britain, but his overtures were ignored until the First World War. Toward the end of that conflict, the Saudis resumed the struggle for control of inner Arabia. By early 1926, they defeated their Hashimite rivals, and Abdul Aziz became King of the Hijaz.



The financial benefits of the alliance with Britain had helped to buttress the Saudi regime. However, the impact of the world depression severely strained the finances of the nascent kingdom. In 1933, King Abdul Aziz was induced to offer an oil concession, for which Standard Oil of California outbid its British competitor. The subsequent discovery and exploitation of large reserves of petroleum guaranteed the financial well-being and, hence, the perpetuity of the regime.

### (2) Geography

Saudi Arabia occupies about four-fifths of the Arabian Peninsula, covering roughly 800,000 square miles (about the size of the United States east of the Mississippi River).

The southern and southeastern boundaries are not fully defined. Geographically, the Kingdom encompasses four major regions: al-Hijaz<sup>3/4</sup>the Red Sea coastal areas and adjoining highlands; Najd<sup>3/4</sup>the desolate interior steppe land, which gradually slopes from the western highlands down to the Persian (Arab) Gulf; al-Hasa<sup>3/4</sup>the Gulf coastal areas; and al-Asir<sup>3/4</sup>the northern extension of the high mountains and narrow coastal plain (al-Tihama) of Yemen.

For governmental administration, the country is currently (1990) divided into 14 provinces. Recent estimates of the population vary considerably, with official Saudi figures being about double those of some diplomatic and private assessments. The discrepancy is due to the lack of precise accounting for the large foreign workforce. For external consumption, the regime has seemingly included expatriate workers in its population--even counting them as Saudi nationals. For internal consumption, it has published statistics which omit many of those same expatriates. According to the more objective estimates, the native population numbers six to seven million.

### (3) Population

The legendary "land of Bedouins" (BED-oo-in) is hardly that anymore. Less than 15% of the Saudi population live as Bedouins, i.e., camel-breeding nomads. Under Saudi rule, many tribesmen have been induced to pursue a settled life-style. Most of the population resides in or around Riyadh and in the towns and oasis settlements of the provinces bordering the Red Sea and Gulf coasts.



The majority of Saudi Arabian citizens trace their descent from the historical tribes and clans of the peninsula. However, some Saudis, even prominent ones, trace their descent from foreigners, who came either as religious pilgrims or as Ottoman functionaries and stayed. Thus, one encounters the following family names among Saudis--al-Masri (the Egyptian), al-Kurdi (the Kurd), al-Sini (the one from China), al-Samarqandi (the one from Samarkand). Recently, a number of foreigners, mainly Arabs, have gained Saudi citizenship in reward for long service to the kingdom.

**(4) Climate** Climatic conditions in Saudi Arabia vary due to differences in elevation and proximity to water. Except for the provinces of al-Asir and Jizan (lower west coast), the country has a desert climate, which is characterized by abrupt changes in temperature at night and sparse and erratic rainfall. During the summer, the heat is intense, frequently exceeding 48 degrees centigrade (120 degrees Fahrenheit) in the interior. The coastal areas have high humidity, while the inner steppe land is extremely arid. In winter, temperatures sometimes drop below freezing in the central and northern areas, but snow and ice are uncommon.

**(5) Religion** Islam, apart from its being the official religion of the kingdom, plays an important and conspicuous role in the life of Saudi Arabia.



Five times daily, the faithful are called to prayer. Shops and offices stop activity so that Muslims can attend the communal prayer at nearby mosques. Few Muslims neglect this obligation, as fundamentalist influences have become stronger through the 1980s.

Observance of the Fast in Ramadhan (RAH-mah-dahn, ninth Islamic month) and the Major Pilgrimage in Dhu al-Hijja (twelfth month) takes priority over most other concerns. Consequently, governmental and large-business activity slackens considerably during those two months and the two intervening ones as well.

**(6) Oil** The petroleum industry dominates the Saudi economy, although it employs only a very small percentage of the native workforce.



Saudi Arabia, which possesses about one-fourth of all known petroleum reserves, is the world's leading oil exporter. It also has significant reserves of natural gas.

Along with the drop in oil revenues over the past several years, other sectors of the economy, such as light industry and agriculture, have grown in importance. Nonetheless, oil is still the main source of foreign exchange and accounts for a very large percentage of government revenue.

**(7) Government** Saudi Arabia is a traditional monarchy, in which the king rules through royal decrees and Islamic legal institutions. Despite the absence of a formal constitution, political parties, and elections, the powers of the king are in fact limited. His major political decisions must be sanctioned by consensus of the senior members of the Saudi family, including collateral lines, and the members of the religious hierarchy. The day-to-day business of government is carried out by various ministries, many of which are headed by princes.

**(8) Military** The Ministry of Defense and Aviation (MODA) controls the following four components of the Saudi military establishment: Land Force (numbering 45,000); Air Force (15,000 plus); Air Defense Force (5,000); and Naval Force (about 7,000). Of these services, the Air Force has had the most success with modernization, expansion, and upgrade of capabilities over the past fifteen years.

Apart from MODA, the military establishment also includes the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) organization, which has separate ministerial status of its own. The SANG has nearly 40,000 men on its rolls, although only about half of its manpower is employed in regular, full-duty units.

The SANG, which has also gone through a modernization effort, has the mission of protecting vital installations, providing internal defense, and otherwise protecting the regime. Within Saudi society, the military profession has relatively high prestige, except among the newly emerging class of university-educated technocrats.



"Heroism is not measured only by bravery in battle. Heroism is measured as well by a willingness to serve, is realized in the striving, and is proven by the risk of being in harm's way when you are most vulnerable...you will be called upon to summon every bit of moral and physical courage you possess.

These are challenging times for us all."

General Gordon R. Sullivan

## Review Quiz: Overview

**Fill in the blanks** Fill in the blanks with the most correct word listed at the bottom. Not all words listed will be used.

Americans live a (1) \_\_\_\_\_-moving,  
(2) \_\_\_\_\_-changing, and closely tied to advanced  
(3) \_\_\_\_\_ lifestyle. Many Saudis practice a  
way of life which flows at a much more  
(4) \_\_\_\_\_ fashion.  
Saudis mainly want (5) \_\_\_\_\_ and  
(6) \_\_\_\_\_ change, not social change.  
Observance of the Fast in (7) \_\_\_\_\_ and  
the major (8) \_\_\_\_\_ in Dhu al-Hajj take  
priority over most other Saudi concerns.  
The petroleum industry, dominating the Saudi economy,  
employs a (9) \_\_\_\_\_ percentage of the national work-  
force.  
Within Saudi Society, the military profession has a  
relatively (10) \_\_\_\_\_ prestige.

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frantic	low	industrial	erratic
fast	Ramadan	obtuse	leisurely
large	nomadic	stationary	small
technological	slow	high	pilgrimage
antiquated	technological	fast	superb